DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 222 380 SE 039 474

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TITLE Creationism and Scientism.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Controversial Issues (Course Content); *Creationism; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evolution; Higher Education; *Religious Factors; *Science Education; Science Instruction

ABSTRACT

The creationism evolution controversy has become a problem of major concern in many states, especially Arkansas and Louisiana, and is the basis for dispute in many courts. Creationists, sensing the need for a modern approach, have now become less concerned with the theological rationale for their argument and have turned to the scientific field as a base for their claims. Creationism starts with a fixed position, a conclusion, which is in direct contrast with that of pure science which holds to nothing until facts are generated which point toward an assumption, then an experimentally-based theory, and in some cases, finally, a law. For the true religious fundamentalist, the Bible is the literal word of God and within its pages are the answers and solutions to life's problems and perplexities. When the Bible says in clear language that God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh, man, say the creationists, should believe that precisely as it is written. This position held by creationists is contrasted to the position promulgated by modern scientists. Several reactions to the controversy are discussed. (Author/JN)

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CREATIONISM AND SCIENTISM

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INTRODUCTION

An unnamed staff reporter for "The Commercial Appeal," a daily newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee, wrote in February of 1982 that "The union of theology and science may or may not be a marriage made in heaven, but it definitely produces offspring that raise the devil on earth."[1]

Well over a century has elapsed since Darwin's Origin of Species appeared to infuriate what may well have been the first creationists in American history. Almost the same number of years have gone by since Thomas Huxley, the British biologist and writer, laid waste the arguments for creationism propounded by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce. And now, another half century has passed since the famous Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, a battle which the so-called fundamentalists won, but even then did not bring an end to the war. There was, however, a prolonged lull in the conflict thereafter which continued into the early sixties. In 1967, a Tennessee high school teacher named Gary Scott, forfeited his position because he taught the theory of evolution, which indicates that although the fires of

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dispute had been smoldering, they had not died.

A number of factors appeared in the 1960's and early 1970's to rekindle the flames. There was painful social upheaval as many communities adjusted to the mandates for school integration issued by the United States Supreme Court, the loss of national pride because of the seemingly unending war in Vietnam, the embarrassment connected with Watergate, and the sudden loss of self-confidence and independence associated with the realization that OPEC controlled our destiny.

By this time, in the name of democracy in the schools, Deweyism, or Progressive Education, had infiltrated first private and then public schools in the nation. Pupils were not to learn by revelation or from authority but "learn by doing." The new humanism taught us that we could be religious without that quality affecting our daily lives. Even morality became relative and situational. Dewey's ethical teaching received some assistance from the wave of rationalism of the time and also from the atheistic philosophy of Friedrich Nietszche.[2] The barbarism of the Germans in World War II indicated that even the value of human life had reached a low level. Permeating all these developments were new philosophies such as positivism which appeared to many to promote, at least, agnosticism, and existentialism which was all things to all men, theistic or atheistic.

Perhaps the pendalum swung too far left too quickly, but in any event, opposing forces developed to counteract trends in school and society. The country began a move toward conservatism in politics,

religion, and education, to mention a few. Creationist centers, notably two in Southern California, were established to promote the return to traditional religious values and to capitalize on the new climate of thought. While the period of national prosperity during the fifties and sixties provided funds for fundamentalists to build more fine churches and develop campuses of their own for higher education, the recession that followed also worked in their favor. The economic woes of the late 1970's and early 1980's emphasized the sense of disillusionment and a position of national vulnerability. Much like the turtle under attack, Americans began to pull back to proven havens of safety, and the time was ripe for the declaration of war by the new creationists.

Once again creationism versus scientism has become a problem of major concern in many states, especially Arkansas and Louisiana, is the basis for dispute in many courts, and may very well appear finally before the U.S. Supreme Court. In fact, the nation's chief executive said in a 1980 speech before an audience of church leaders, that evolution was only a "theory" and that if it was to be taught in the schools, then "...the biblical story of creation should also be taught."[3]

Creationists sensing the need for a more modern approach have now become less concerned with the theological rationale for their argument. They have turned to the scientific field as a base for their claims. Today, many of the creationists advocates have Ph.D.'s in the various sciences, and these intellectuals have produced considerable "evidence" of a "sudden" or "special" creation of certain species of life on the orb where we live. And they have an impressive degree

of support including that of organized religion, primarily from fundamentalists. There are at least thirty million avowed believers in a literal interpretation of the Christian Bible, plus that many more who see themselves as "born again" disciples.[4] At least one-fourth of the current population of the United States supports the creationist point of view.

Evolution, with or without Darwin's interpretation and "natural selection," has become the symbol or the banner of all that is right and good and decent. The Christian Right is seemingly staking its rise or fall on this one major issue. Evolution is practically synonymous with, or at least an offspring of, "secular humanism." Such philosophy, we are warned, leads to materialism, mechanism, agnosticism, and eventually to atheistic communism. The effects of such influences are already evident in the Western world as can be seen in the increasing number of acts of violence, the excessive use of drugs and alcohol, and the lack of respect for parents, teachers, and other leaders. We are on the verge of total social degeneration and moral bankruptcy, hold the religious evangelicals. Evolution, they say, in effect removes God from the human scene, and without God, men are animals and behave like animals. It is no wonder, then, that the creationists see themselves as "Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war."

A. POSITION OF THE CREATIONISTS

Creationism starts with a fixed position, a conclusion, which is in direct contrast with that of pure science which holds to nothing until facts are generated which point toward an assumption, then an experimentally-based theory, and in some cases, finally a law. For the true religious fundamentalist, the Bible is the literal Word of God and within its pages are the answers and solutions to life's problems and perplexities. The born again individual embraces the teachings of a virgin birth, a Calvary which potentially defeats sin, the resurrection of Christ and of all true believers, and an eternal heaven for the members of the now invisible church, and a burning hell for all those who have rejected God's love and die not repenting of their sins.

When the Bible says in clear language that God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh, man, say the creationists, should believe that precisely as it is written. Also, if one accurately computes the centuries of human history as recorded in the Bible, it will be seen that the universe is not more than 10,000 years old, not the billions of years secular scientists maintain. Further, there was a real flood of water about the period of 2400 B.C. and an ark was used to bring about the survival of life on this earth.

Creationists are fond of stating that according to the opposing scientists themselves that evolution is only a theory. But a "theory" to the creationists implies not much more than an assumption, while to

other scientists the word implies extensive research, empirical approaches, and the collection of considerable data.

A common question asked by the creationists is this: How would it be possible for life to appear on earth with all of its complexities, if as evolution holds, all things move from order to an increasing state of disorder? An ordered and predictable universe testifies to the work of a great intelligence, namely God.

Scientists commonly utilize fossil records to support evolutionary theory. The creationists say that the intermediate forms of life which would show how one species evolved into another have never been found. Creationists, therefore, discount the support for evolutionary theory based on fossil records.

Radioactive dating methods, which secular scientists say are supported by what is known about the constant rate of radioactive decay, are criticized by the creationists as well. Such methods of determining the age of the earth, as applied to individual examples, have not proven to be accurate. In practice, these scientists themselves have changed their minds and their findings many times, respond the anti-evolutionists.

Calling themselves "scientific creationists," these twentieth century fundamentalists no longer demand that the teachers and the substance of evolutionary theory be thrown out of the public school curricula, but that both the biblical story of creation and the

theory of evolution be presented to all students. This "two-model" concept became law in Arkansas and Louisiana, and at least twelve other states have introduced similar legislation.[5] Numerous local school boards operate under the "equal time" provision, as well as do textbook writers and publishers and an untold number of individual teachers who are affected by this dilemma.

Creationists further hold that their position is as scientific as that of the opposing secular scientific community. And also, if there are those scholars who insist on dubbing creationism a "theory," then evolution is no different in that respect either. Creationism seems to hold that "creation science is as scientific as the science of the secular scientists and as theoretical and the theory of the evolutionists.

B. POSITION OF THE MODERN SCIENTISTS

Majority of the scientists in the Western world hold that "creation science" has little or nothing in common with real science. Creationism is a religion, they say, and not a science at all.

Modern scientists begin with the assumption that everything in the universe operates under natural laws. The very nature of their task demands that the scientists assume explainable causes in concrete terms for all phenomena. That position does not make all scientists atheists. Scientists generally discount Christian mysticism in their search for truth concerning the physical world. Most scientists today would respond to the charges of the creationists by saying that we do not live in an ordered world at all, but in a chaotic one and it has always been that way. Further, that fossil records were developed under ideal conditions, that the development of fossils took a great deal of time, and that with additional time to study, even the gaps might be filled in. Additionally, modern evolutionists do not all believe in a long process of development of all living things. In contrast, there are many thinkers who hold that there could have been sudden transitions which would produce no fossils. Thus, there would be no real gaps at all, or one might say, the gaps were necessary or logical breaks in the process. As for the use of radioactive dating methods, these have been verified numerous times using items of known antiquity, and no reputable scientists today would dare discount them.

To accept the methods, data, and conclusions of the creation-scientists, contend the evolutionists, would mean the wholesale destruction of scientific knowledge in almost every field of study. Much of what has been regarded as science in the past one-hundred years or more would be in error and thus discarded, if the creationists are correct. A writer in the READER'S DIGEST summarized the point: "...evidence gathered during the last two centuries - from geology, paleontology, molecular biology and many other scientific disciplines - makes evolution a virtual certainty."[6]

C. SOME REACTIONS TO THE CONTROVERSY

It is clear that the overly-literal interpretation by extreme fundamentalists of the Book of Genesis in the Christian Bible precipitates much of the controversy. First, the "six days" referred to in the Scriptures need not be twenty-four hour days as we know them. These could very well be "ages of time" and include long periods of development, sufficient to encompass the contention of modern scientists that the universe is probably twenty billion years old. This view may be called "Theistic Evolution" and disolves many of the problems that separate these rival camps, including those of dating materials and fossil records.

Another error may be that of viewing the Bible as a book of science, when that was never the intent of its writers. Some scholars of Scripture see the Book of Genesis as a poem indicating God's relationship to man; or as an allegory not intended for literal interpretation. Wresting the Scriptures by too much literalness is an evil in itself and diverts attention away from the central principles and teachings of the good book.

Note too, that if the earth existed for some time before the coming of Adam and Eve, then there could have been nonhuman anthropoids living here before them which would account for both fossils and footprints of considerable age. Even the Christian fundamentalists could accept the possibility that the earth was created through a long process of evolution, thus making room for an earth billions of

years old and inhabited by pre-adamic, advanced ape-like creatures, and this would accommodate most of the scientific data of the modern day. Some writers hold that the major difference between pre-adamic creatures and human kind is that the latter had souls and were capable of spiritual understanding, while the former creatures had no souls and no capacity for abstractions.

Many philosophers of this day hold that part of the controversy could be resolved if the parties concerned understood the function of method. That is, there is not one method, say scientific, in this case, but a number of methods. The principle is simple, that the nature of the material under study should determine the method to be employed. Scientists then should employ empirical and experimental methods, while those in religion should employ revelation. Eventually the truth in one, if it be the truth, will agree with the truth in the other, if that also is the truth. Both parties would do well to utilize additional methods in conjunction with those named above, such as rationalism and a healthy skepticism.

One final point must be made. If the creationists insist that "fair is fair" and that it is only democratic to present both sides of the argument to students in our schools and colleges, then are the creationists prepared to do this in their own nonpublic institutions as well? If the failure to teach both models of thought is a violation of academic freedom and of the principle of separation of church and state as they hold, then are they not inconsistent in the writing of their own curricula? And do their professors test and experiment

with alternative theories in the science laboratories of these church colleges? Are these professors even allowed to consider these possibilities?

CONCLUSION

Nothing recorded or spoken here will ever lay this dispute to permanent rest. The same unproductive arguments will survive--much like the medieval argument concerning how many angels could stand on the head of a pin. We all enjoy the intellectual stimulation of an impossible argument and the mental gymnastics such discussion precipitates, and some of us, even after today, will continue to indulge in some form of academic psychoneurosis.

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